

The Sea of Grass

Auto Tour

*"Nothing in nature can be compared
to the prairie but the ocean..."*

*the distant wagon becomes the sail ...
the green grass the green sea ... and
the roving herds, monsters of the
deep."*

Matt Field On the Santa Fe Trail



USDA Forest Service
Cimarron National Grassland

This publication is paid in part by



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Prehistoric habitat of camels, horses and giant turtles, homeland to tribes of Native Americans, trade route of Santa Fe Trail merchants, proving-ground of pioneer settlers, and relaxation retreat for modern man ... the "Sea of Grass" has seen an ever-changing parade of inhabitants over the centuries. We welcome you to its current resident - the Cimarron National Grassland - and invite you to experience the history and understand the present-day management of the area by way of a self-guided, 30-mile Auto Tour. This Tour allows you to take in the various aspects of the Cimarron National Grassland. As you travel the route, note these special features:

Ecosystems: The Cimarron National Grassland contains three ecosystems, distinguished primarily by vegetation, which in turn is determined by soil type and groundwater availability. Each ecosystem - Shortgrass Prairie, Sand-Sage Prairie and Wooded Riparian - requires a different management strategy to ensure the best use is made of existing resources. Livestock grazing, vehicle travel management, wildlife habitat management and the controlled use of fire each play a part in maintaining healthy ecosystems.

History: The Homestead Act of 1862 brought thousands of settlers from the east out to the prairies of the Great Plains. The settlers' farming techniques were ill-suited to the sandy prairie soil, and when prolonged drought and the Great Depression hit in the early 1930s, farmers saw their crops disappear in the great brown clouds of the Dust Bowl era. Relief began in 1932 when Congress passed laws allowing the government to purchase land from those who "wanted out". Under the management of various agencies, and through the hard work of thousands, these purchased lands were rejuvenated, and are now public lands administered by the USDA Forest Service. Here they were named the Cimarron National Grassland.

Santa Fe Trail: As you tour the Grassland, you will notice limestone posts set in the ground at points along the route. These posts designate the archeologically-verified location of the Santa Fe National Historic Trail. A companion trail was created to accompany the Santa Fe Trail; it consists of a mowed swath alongside areas where Trail ruts still exist, and on top of the actual Trail location where ruts are no longer evident. This was done to preserve existing Trail remnants while still allowing visitors a quality Santa Fe Trail experience.

The Auto Tour utilizes gravel roads that are suitable for most vehicles, including sedans and RVs. **Be cautioned that the roads can become slippery with even small amounts of rain;** we therefore suggest that you refrain from enjoying the Tour during inclement weather.

Each stop on the Tour is designated by an Auto Tour logo sign, a short description of the stop, and a number that corresponds to the numbered narratives in this brochure. Also included are six Points of Interest (POI) that make intriguing "drive bys" or short side trips off the main Auto Tour route. Each POI sign has a Point of Interest sign and a letter that corresponds to the lettered narratives at the end of this brochure. Before you begin, check the map for the locations of each POI so that you can plan to include those that interest you in your tour.

TO BEGIN THE TOUR

From the junction of Highway 56 and Morton Street (main street of Elkhart), travel NW through Elkhart on Morton Street to the intersection of Hwy 27. Turn right onto Hwy 27 (Baca Ave) going north and drive 7 1/2 miles out of Elkhart. At Forest Service Road 700, turn right (E) and travel 1 mile to Stop 1, Artesian Well.

Note [If you wish to begin your tour with POI- A (Prairie Dog Town), drive west on Hwy 56 to the edge of Elkhart where Oklahoma Hwy 95, Kansas Hwy 56 and Kansas Hwy 27 intersect. Turn right (N) onto Hwy 27, cross the railroad tracks, and then turn left (W) onto County Road A. Travel 7 1/2 miles west on this road until you see the POI- A sign on your right. After viewing the prairie dog town, continue on another 1/2 mile to POI-B; if you wish. After viewing the site, turn around and retrace your path to the intersection at Hwy 27. Turn left (N) onto Hwy 27 and travel 8 1/2 miles out of Elkhart to Forest Service Road 700, where you will turn right (E) and travel 1 mile to Stop 1 (Artesian Well)]

Stop 1 - Artesian (Miracle) Well: The windmill located on this water well is usually not connected, as the water occasionally flows naturally from the ground. The year-round water flow is affected by fluctuations in the Ogallala Water Aquifer. The Miracle Well is one of close to 200 windmills on the Grassland that supply water for wildlife and livestock. It is 2.1 miles to Stop 2.

Stop 2 - Livestock Grazing: The Grassland provides pasture for approximately 5,000 head of cattle each year. The livestock are owned by local ranchers and graze from May 1 to October 31 under a permit with the Forest Service. Grazing is used as a tool to manipulate and manage vegetation conditions and composition. The corrals at this Stop are used during "roundup" of the cattle grazed on the Grassland, and are available the rest of the year for use by visiting horse-back riders and stock packers. It is 1.2 miles to Stop 3.

Stop 3 - Cimarron Recreation Area: Constructed in 1991, the area contains 14 campsites, a day-use picnic area, and a group-use area. Complete with rest rooms, water, grills, horse corrals, hiking and horse-back trail access points, fishing ponds and the first handicap-accessible fishing dock in southwest Kansas, the Recreation Area is a particularly popular spot. It is 2.8 miles to Stop 4.

Stop 4 - Wildlife Habitat: The cottonwood, willow and salt-cedar trees growing in the Cimarron River's wooded riparian ecosystem provide excellent habitat for wildlife. Elk, deer, turkey and quail make good use of the cover, as do a large number of songbirds and raptors. Turn left (N) and go 0.3 miles to Stop 5.

Stop 5 - Cimarron River: The usually dry riverbed of the Cimarron River runs through the heart of the Grassland and provides recreation opportunities and wildlife habitat. The river actually runs 2 ft. to 4 ft. beneath the sand, and normally flows visibly in the riverbed only in times of flood. Go 1/4 mile north, then turn left (W) onto FS600 to Stop 6 (4 miles), or continue north to POI-D.

Stop 6 - Pioneer Memorial: The two graves in the enclosure belong to the daughters of a pioneer family who lived at the Point of Rocks Ranch that was located beneath Point of Rocks, some nine miles upstream. In 1914, a flash flood washed away the ranch and swept the children downstream to this point on the old 81 Ranch, where their bodies were found and brought uphill to be buried here. It is 0.9 miles to the turnoff to POI-E, or 3.0 miles to Stop 7.

Stop 7 - Santa Fe Trail: The Cimarron Route of the Santa Fe Trail was used primarily by adventurous shipping merchants to transport goods to and from Santa Fe in the 1800s. Ruts are now visible as a gentle swale at several spots on the Grassland. It is 2.0 miles to Stop 8.

Stop 8 - Oil & Gas Development: The oil and gas well to the north is typical of nearly 500 similar facilities on the Grassland. Wells are operated by private corporations under a leasing system, and generate millions of dollars in royalties for the Government. By authority of the Bankhead-Jones Act, 25% of these royalties come back to Morton and Stevens Counties for roads or schools. The subsurface beneath the Grassland contains numerous layers, or formations, of oil/gas-bearing strata, which contributes greatly to the economic development of southwest Kansas. It is 0.6 miles to stop 9.

Stop 9 - Middle Spring: Santa Fe Trail travelers faced over 40 miles of waterless prairie between Lower Spring (near Ulysses, KS) and the dependable, year-round artesian spring found here at Middle Spring. This site, therefore, was a stopover for virtually every merchant wagon train traveling this branch of the Santa Fe Trail. It is 0.9 mile to Stop 10.

Stop 10 - Point of Rocks: Native Americans possibly scouted for buffalo from this third-highest point in Kansas, and in 1541, Coronado's expedition made note of the formation for future explorers. During the days of the Santa Fe Trail, Point of Rocks served as a major landmark. At this point on the tour, exit Point of Rocks and turn right (E), retrace your path back to Hwy 27 where you will turn left (N), drive up the hill and arrive at Stop 11. It is 3.4 miles to Stop 11.

Stop 11 - Scenic Overlook. A good view of the Cimarron River corridor is offered from this site. Prior to 1940, very few trees grew along the river. Trees brought in by settlers, seeds washed down-river during floods and the control of wildfire and grazing, all contributed to the establishment of the wooded area you now see.

POINTS OF INTEREST

A - Prairie Dog Town: Close-cropped vegetation in this area marks the site of a prairie dog town. The small rodents feed on the plants surrounding their burrows, thereby removing cover for would-be predators. Burrowing owls commonly inhabit abandoned prairie dog burrows. (We do not recommend walking in or through the prairie dog towns.)

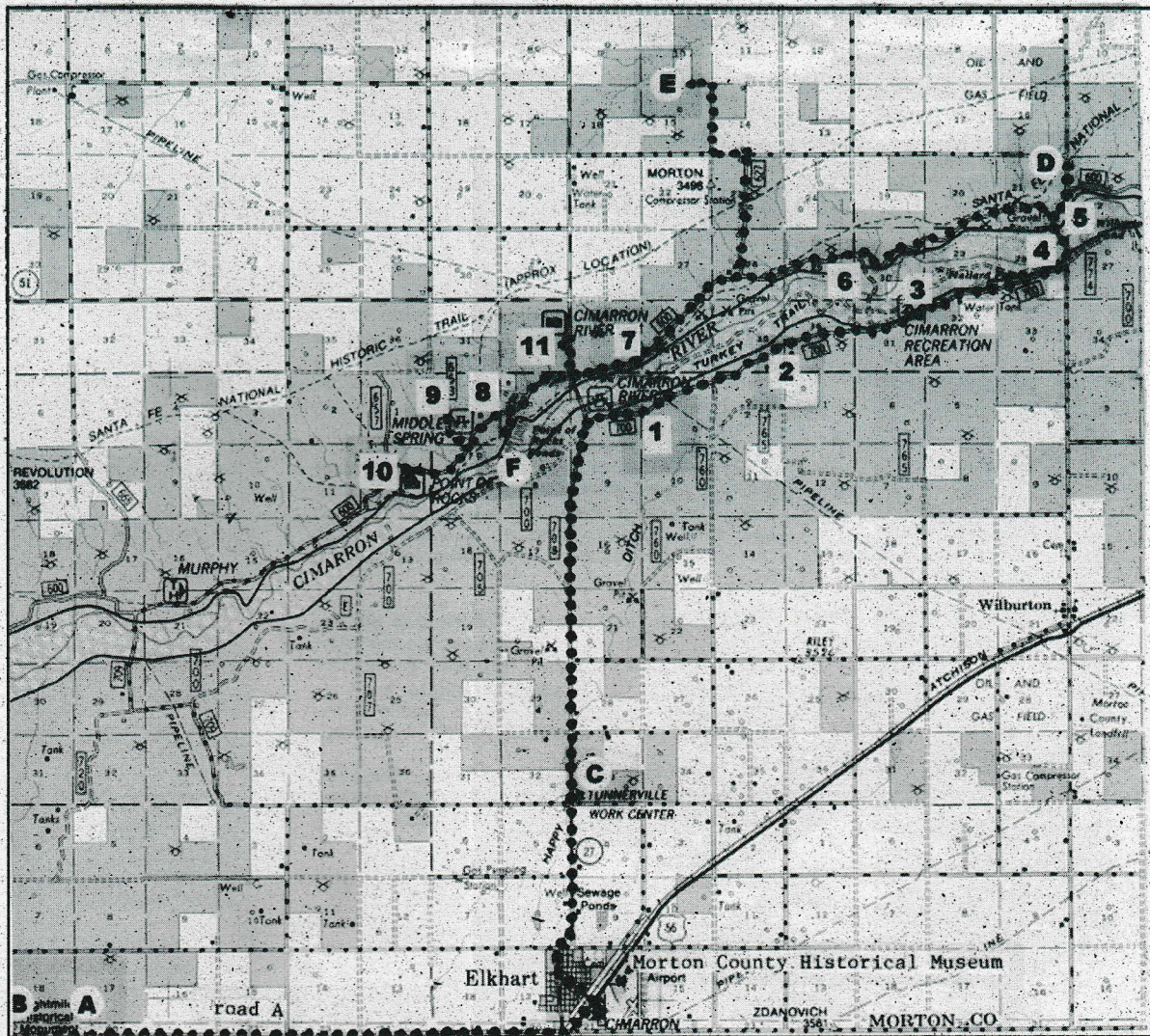
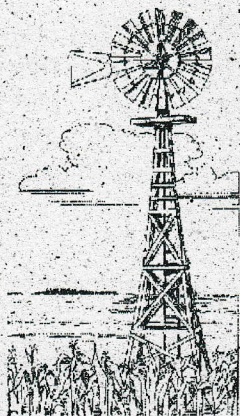
B - Eightmile Corner: The 1903 windmill stands near the spot where Kansas, Oklahoma and Colorado meet. Since the early 1800s, the actual location of the junction was hotly disputed - surveys had contained errors and markers had been lost in drifting sand. A marker from the 1903 Carpenter survey is located 3/4 mile north, but acceptance of this survey was vetoed by President Roosevelt in 1908. With the advent of satellite technology, the true geographic corner was marked here in 1990 by the Bureau of Land Management. The survey marker is now a reference point for satellite-based computerized mapping and is secured 4' below the brass plate in the middle of the road.

C - Tunnerville Work Center: The Tunnerville Work Center is the shop and barn area for the Grassland. At the end of the Dust Bowl era, it served as headquarters for the Soil Conservation Service's efforts to revegetate the denuded prairie. It was during this time that the Work Center received its name. Each morning, laborers would load onto trucks for the ride from Elkhart out to headquarters. They said they were "riding the Tunnerville Trolley", which was a phrase from a popular song of the times. Today you can see the results of these men's labors, and those of many more workers that followed, in the rejuvenated prairies of the Cimarron National Grassland.

D - Santa Fe Trail Ruts: The Trail ruts at this site are considerably more visible than are those located at Stop 7.

E - Boehm Gas Storage Field: The geologic formations under this area are used by Colorado Interstate Gas Company as a storage cache for natural gas. The natural gas is pumped down into the porous rock during periods of light consumer demand, and withdrawn during periods of high demand.

F - Point of Rock Ponds: These narrow ponds provide water for wildlife, and are stocked with bass, channel catfish and bluegill for angling enjoyment. Fishing ponds on the Grassland receive more fishing pressure per acre than any other fishing waters in Kansas.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

on the Cimarron National Grassland, please write to: USDA Forest Service, P.O. Box 300, Elkhart, KS 67950, or telephone 316-697-4621. Office hours are Monday-Friday, 8-5. Visit the Morton County Historical Museum to see the nationally certified Santa Fe Trail exhibit and other historical exhibits of Morton County. You may contact the Museum at 316-697-2833.

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